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Invisible Influenced,
by Will PAPPENHEIMER and Chipp JANSEN (USA), 2007

by [Rob Myers](#)

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Invisible Influenced by Will Pappenheimer and Chipp Jansen is part of the long-running Turbulence net art commissions series (with funds from the Jerome Foundation). It is a browser-based work implemented in Flash that consists of a map of North America with the silhouette of the contiguous United States drawn on top of it and an accompanying graphical user interface that allows you to choose sets of data to apply to the silhouette.



The named data sets are organized into categories; Natural, Indexes, Disturbances, and Social. You can choose one or more sets to apply to the map and choose whether to apply them for a fixed period or indefinitely. The silhouette of the States is then transformed and stretched out of shape over time as the data is applied to it. As the map morphs, text and images from media reports in each selected data set flicker across the separate data set interface. Arrows around the map indicate the direction that the effect of the data is coming from, and the traditional paper map over which the silhouette is superimposed fades away as the data starts to affect it.

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As this process continues the silhouette turns from the familiar outline of the contiguous United States into what looks more like an expressive figure from a high modernist hard-edged abstract artwork or a neo-geo riff on the same. The drifting (or buffeted) form is aesthetically pleasing but slightly disturbing to watch at first. It undergoes a dramatic transformation, from map to a figure that somehow represents data rather than geography (or statehood), dramatizing the effects of that data as a result.

By showing the process of data affecting its subject *Invisible Influenced* shows how the imperceptible forces of information shape a nation. If we identify a nation with its people, this is the process of affecting public opinion. If we identify a nation with its government, this is the process of affecting policy. The geometric reshaping of the state is a metaphor for the ideological reshaping of the state, both in response to the flow of information. The messenger for that information can be seen flickering across the data set interface, it is the global media network of the Internet.

Maps have historically been part of the iconography of states and of their power. By delineating the extent of the state they also show the limits of that power, and of the knowledge that supports it. Features of a map that seem accurate in one age or regime may not seem so in another. This is true of sea monsters as much as of reductions in detail or accuracy due to the data or projection used. But it is not their intended purpose. It is a latent within them.

As icons, maps have naturally been the target of iconoclasts. To take the example of maps of the United States, Jasper Johns painted colourful mock-expressive renderings of maps of the USA as a follow up to his series of paintings of the American flag. America was also the subject of Art & Language's less expressive but even more abstract series of images of deliberate cartographic errors starting with "Map Not To Indicate...", which as its title suggests does not show most of the United States despite depicting the geographic region that it covers.

Both Johns' and Art & Language's maps defamiliarize their cartographic national subjects by rendering them in un-map-like graphic styles that are equally the subject of their iconoclasm. In Johns' case this is the painterly brushwork of abstract expressionism, in Art & Language's case it is the cool objectivity of informational diagrams. Maps are an appropriate subject when

putting the political and artistic order into mutually iconoclastic tension.

It is clear that maps are not simple mathematical projections of information. Their production is a matter of ordering and projecting information into a useful and visually appealing form. That information is interpreted and mediated as part of this task, the resulting representations do not offer direct access to the original data or to the reality that it was gathered from. But the distilled forms of these representations can still easily and effectively be related back to the original data and thereby hopefully to reality. Their usefulness as a tool is a product of their aesthetics enabling the exploration of this relationship rather than obfuscating it.

This is also true of the interactive rendering or modelling of data sets visually by computer. This has come to be known as data visualisation, a term that has come to be associated in recent years with the work of Ben Fry and the Processing programming environment. Guided on the one hand by the sober minimalism of Edward Tufte's books on information graphics and on the other by the dense animations linked from the processing.org web site, data visualisation is a culturally active but critically under-explored area of contemporary aesthetics.

Data visualization is the socialist realism of the neoliberal era. It is the ideal social form aspired to by the economic order made real as aesthetic order, the perfect flow of information through not markets but through artworks. The aesthetics of data visualisation are often used for decorative effect without underlying important data. This results in a kind of abstract art or pastoral, a sight to train or relax the minds of those who would seek exploitable value or manageable order in data.

Data visualisation differs from net art in that it is intended as a tool for analysing data rather than for contemplation. It is a means rather than an end in itself. It produces artifacts to be treated as tools rather than artworks, their aesthetic value is instrumental. The audience, or the users, for data visualization are not an art audience. Its use context is not an art context.

Net art, with its use of web browsers reminiscent of mail art's use of the postal service, similarly exists in a non-art context. But it seeks to exploit that context to introduce its own, artistic, context. By doing so it can find or create an art audience for itself. Art has a different audience with different uses for its artefact's than data visualisation. Addressing this audience, and speaking its visual language however obliquely, is what marks out even the most unconventionally unaesthetic net art as art.

Invisible Influenced looks at first glance like a data visualisation tool. It models the effects of data sets and provides a interface to modify the application of that data. It uses real-world data sets as source material. This means that it is not a data visualization pastoral. But the forms that it renders based on the map do not seem to work as an easily exploited interface to those data sets. The effects of the data are difficult to read directly. They are there in abstracted, dramatized form. It is the effects of the data that is presented rather than the data itself.

It is this presentation of effect for contemplation that makes *Invisible Influenced* art rather than a software tool. It makes a drama of a normally unseen or unconsidered process, making it apparent. In the new form that results from that process the fine-grained data cannot be recovered or interpreted any more than the original form of the map can. But what can be recovered from the process of transformation and remembered when looking at the new form is that the process can clearly be seen in a way that neither data visualisation nor cartography nor the underlying data of the global internet could show in themselves.

Like the American maps of Johns and of Art & Language, Pappenheimer and Jansen present a map of iconoclastic tension between the contemporary political and aesthetic environments. The politics are those of America's post-9/11 place in the world and the aesthetics are those of data visualisation. This is how it is now, it is the historical process that we are living through, and it is ongoing.

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